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# QUE VIVA CHANGO

## Afro-Cuban Syncretic Cults and Culture in Cuba

*Jeanne Brody*

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### Introduction

While it is usually the anthropologist who chooses his field of research, on rare occasions the reverse occurs : the field seems to seek out the researcher. These preliminary remarks concerning syncretic Afro-Cuban religious cults and culture are a case in point. It was in spring 1982 that the researcher's avocation brought her into contact with Cubans temporarily living in Paris. Out of this contact and subsequent others<sup>1</sup> both with Cubans and Cuba, itself, certain phenomena imposed themselves so insistently upon the researcher's attention, that she could not help but respond. This paper records the resulting observations and preliminary analyses.

A few years ago, before returning to his country after an extended stay in Paris, a Cuban friend offered me a bottle-holder in the form of a doll. Made of black felt, the bottom half of the doll was a simple cylinder, while the top half was constructed in the form of a face. Cowrie shells represented the eyes and mouth ; the nose was an elongated diamond-shaped piece of copper from which a few, greyish feathers emerged. The doll's hair consisted of multiple strands of long black crude rope which hung down the sides of the face and

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1. Over a period of ten years, the researcher made nine visits to Cuba. Lengths of stay varied from one week to three months. The visits being outside the framework of an anthropological mission, the researcher conducted her field work sporadically and to the degree and under the conditions that her professional obligations permitted.

was gathered together at the top of the head by three intertwined ribbons of red, blue and yellow. These same ribbons also ran along down through the strands of black yarn. The doll wore a metal pendant around its neck and had two small curved wooden horns sticking out of either side of its head. It was one foot high. According to my friend, the doll represented a *diablito*, an African spirit from the nether world. My friend, not religious and of Spanish descent, could not tell me anything more.

## IMAGE NON LIBRE DE DROIT

Fig. 1. A « *Kokorikamo* » or « *Kokorioko* », one particular type of « *diablito* » which takes to the street to dance at Carnival time.

A *Kokorikamo* or *Kokorioko* is a grotesque mask of some sort (in this case an ox skull) draped in a shapeless piece of cloth made of rags, palm fibers, rope and different colored ribbons. The roots of the African word *koko* and *eri-oko* can be found in the Bantu, Yoruba and Congolese languages and designate some kind of mysterious, supernatural being, and / or ancestor, closely related to the world of sorcery. (F. Ortiz, 1920).

I put the doll in a corner of the apartment among other bric-a-brac, until one day when another friend, familiar with Afro-Cuban religious beliefs, told me that my *diablito* was not where he should be... According to him, the doll had to be placed where all entering the apartment could see it. Furthermore, I was to put a bottle of rum, full or partially full, inside the holder and place one or more cigars nearby.

My next encounter with Afro-Cuban religious culture occurred in the José Martí airport in Havana a year and a half later at the occasion of my first visit to Cuba. There, amidst other objects, in glass display cases and in tourist posters on the airport walls I could see various versions of my *diablito*, the name given to these Afro-Cuban fetishes (Ortiz 1920)<sup>2</sup> by the Spaniards (fig. 1). Some were smaller than mine ; some were made with straw instead of felt cloth and some were yellow or red instead of black. Subsequently I was to see these same dolls in the tourist shops, hotels, and particularly in the homes of many of the people to whom I paid visits. What was perhaps a more significant discovery, however, was the presence in these same shops and homes of other items which, while to the untrained eye might be taken for decoration, were, in fact, as I was myself to learn, cult objects. Children's toys,

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2. In colonial Cuba during All King's Day, African slaves were allowed to parade in their ethnic costumes and perform their traditional music and dances. To the Spanish, one such frequently used costume (the aforementioned doll is an example) resembled the « devil » of the Corpus Christi processions.

dolls, in particular, dressed in bright colors or color-combinations such as royal blue and white, red and white, red and black, green and gold, yellow or gold, plain white, porcelain jars or bowls, copperware or gold jewelry, porcelain or clay plates, metal tools, sea shells, plants, a simple plate of fruit all had significance in Afro-Cuban religious culture. Furthermore, in homes the corresponding disposition, juxtaposition and / or combination of such objects often indicated which of the various Afro-Cuban cult or cults was in question ; whether or not the inhabitants of the house were followers of one or more of the syncretic cults ; which *orishas*<sup>3</sup> were their guardian angels and whether or not one or more of the person(s) living in the house had initiated anyone else into the religion.

## Mixed Roots

Cuba is and from its discovery by Columbus in 1492 always has been an ethnically very mixed population. Founded in the name of the Spanish crown in 1526, the Spanish colonizers soon began to « import » slaves from Africa to replace the indigenous population, whom disease and hard-working conditions had rapidly decimated. By the late 1700s, blacks outnumbered whites on the island 340 000 to 291 000 (Carpentier 1945 & 1979).

The immigrant Spaniards (themselves of diverse ethnic origins) brought with them Catholicism, which they imposed as the dominant religion of the colony. The official Church dogma was accompanied by many left-over medieval superstitions and popular customs, among which the cult of the Virgin. The slaves brought over by force from Africa were also an ethnically mixed population. And they, too, brought with them various beliefs which ranged in complexity. The mixture and superposition of these beliefs and religious dogma created a process of syncretism between Catholic saints and African supernatural forces.

The four most important Afro-Cuban syncretic religions in Cuba today are the *Regla de Ocha* or the cult of the orisha, called « Santería », of Yorouba origin (predominantly from Nigeria), *Regla de Palo Monte* of Bantou origin, practiced in the area between the Congo and Angola, the *Regla de Arará*, of Fon origin from Dahomey and Benin and the Rata rituals, a form of vaudou practiced in the Eastern part of the island. (The *Abakuá* or *nañigos*, are not a religion but a secret society open to men only and composed generally of blacks from the region of Calabar.) In all four cults the African deity, a personification of certain powers, attributes and characteristics is identified with a Catholic saint. This syncretism may be relatively simple as in the case of Orula (or Ifa) in Santería who is syncretized with Saint Francis of Assisi, or complex as in the case of Yemaya and Ochún who are both syncretized with the Virgin. The Virgin, however, has various manifestations

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3. Name given to the deities of the yorouba pantheon. These deities have as many human as divine characteristics. They help explain the origin of the universe, natural phenomena and various aspects of life.

called « caminos » or « roads » in Spanish, depending on her combination of attributes and characteristics. In one of her manifestations she is called Yemaya by the santeros, Baluande by the paleros and Okande by the Abakua. In another manifestation, for the santeros, she is Ochún, the Virgin of Charity, and in yet another, Obatalá, the Virgin of Mercy.

## Appearances

While during those first visits to Cuba, I had occasion to notice many curious phenomena related directly or indirectly to Afro-Cuban religious culture, I did not begin to weigh their significance all at once. It was a visit to the home of a santera, a mulato woman in her 50s who lived in a working class part of Havana, which, by providing an important combination of elements gathered together at one time and in one place, served as a conscious impetus to begin this study.

Gloria, the santera in question, lived in a tiny, three room apartment. Her front door opened directly onto a pleasantly but simply furnished living room : a couch, two armchairs, two rocking chairs and a small table on which stood a porcelain jar and two statuettes. Three baby dolls adorned the couch and armchairs ; while about three-quarters of the way off the floor on the wall facing the entrance was a foot-high clay or porcelain painted sculpture of the Virgin. Her robes were bright yellow and on the stand upon which the wall statue stood, were also artificial flowers. The only other objects which struck my eye were a collection of plates of different types, sizes and colors which hung on the kitchen wall. My informant gave me a brief explanation of the origin of each plate and seemed pleased when I offered to bring her one from France on my next visit. She also told me that when I returned it would be her saint's Birthday and that I was invited to the party she was giving in Her honor. She mentioned that her saint was Ochún, the Virgin of Charity.

Several weeks later when I returned to Cuba and went to see Gloria, she and various family and friends were busy making the Birthday dinner, while guests were sitting in a small room decorated in honor of the Virgin, Ochún. Half the room was occupied by a large statuette of the Virgin, draped in yellow shiny robes ; with yellow and gold colored paper and material covering the wall upon which the statuette hung. The floor was covered with similar paper and material. Gold colored jewelry, vases crowned with copper or gold plated jewels, fruits and flowers of various colors and types were presented as were dishes with different kinds of sweets. A copper bell and a plate upon which lay money completed the decor. Gloria showed me into the room, which she explained was the cult room, motioned to me to kneel, ring the bell, salute the Virgin and then leave some change or a bill in the plate, at my discretion. Later on we would eat the food being prepared (sacred food)<sup>4</sup> and then the musicians would come. The party was to last all night.

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4. As a vital substance, food plays an important role in Santeria. Saints' Birthdays or initiation ceremonies are always preceded by a sacrifice to the saint(s). Afterwards, the

## The Sacred

Following this visit, explanations<sup>5</sup> by informants and readings little by little have enabled me to reflect upon what I had previously observed, upon this particular encounter, and upon various others since<sup>6</sup>. To begin with, most of the objects in Gloria's house, a typical middle or lower middle class Cuban home, were cult objects. The wall statue, the most obvious and visible religious element of the decor, is one form of altar, found in many homes of followers of both Catholicism and one or more of the African syncretic cults. It usually represents the patron saint or guardian angel of the owner of the house (and / or the saints of other members of the family, and / or certain general household saints, such as Saint Lazarus, protector of the afflicted).

The dolls in Gloria's house each represented a different saint : Yemaya, the Virgin of Regla (a village near Havana), dressed in blue and white ; Eleggua, Saint Antonio of Padua dressed in red and black and Obatala, Virgin of Mercy, dressed in white. While these particular dolls were *saints' dolls* – they represented and were offerings to the saints they represented – in other cases, where one finds an important collection not just of dolls but other toys of varying sorts, it is rather a sign of the orisha Eleggua in its manifestation as « the child of Antocha »<sup>7</sup>.

The various porcelain jars or recipients of different material in which the saint resides usually contain a certain number of stones considered receptacles of the various saints, which have previously been « anointed » with the blood of sacrificed animals by the believer himself or by a santero. The stones sit in water, which is considered an element particularly receptive to the supernatural. Each jar is placed in a particular location : opposite the wall, in a shady corner, either high up or on the floor according to the saint it represents and the personal characteristics of the saint in question. For example, Eleggua, the saint who shows the way, guardian of entrances, of roads, cross roads is always placed just behind the door. (This explains the curious comment by my Paris friend, who told me that my *diablito* was not in its proper location.)

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remains are cooked and eaten by the guests. This food is supposed to be infused with the magic of the saint. Certain foods of African origin such as gombos, one variety of rice, and igname are typical, as is chicken and lamb. There are also food taboos – foods which the initiate cannot eat – or occasions when certain foods are forbidden. It is also said that one should never refuse food to someone, be he friend or enemy.

5. Since we are dealing with mainly oral cultures, there may be discrepancies from one informant to another.
6. The researcher visited the homes of over twenty santeros, babalawos or italeros in the course of her trips, was present at several saint's day parties, initiation ceremonies and various religious festivities. Her contacts with informants from various social, racial, ethnic, political and religious origins have provided, moreover, a wide perspective from which to try to analyse the phenomena under study.
7. Eleggua is sometimes synthesized with the « child of Antocha ». According to legend, during the Arab occupation of Spain, many Christians suffered thirst and hunger in Moorish jails where the only visitors allowed were children. One day, a small boy visited the prison with a basket of bread and a bottle of water. Miraculously both sufficed to feed all the prisoners. The child was Jesus Christ returned to earth.

The plates in Gloria's kitchen were also religious objects but of a different nature. In the Cuban synthetic religious cults one may be a believer and practice the religion without any previous initiation or permission or ceremony. However, one may, and in certain cases it is even encouraged, that one *hacerse santo* (sanctifies oneself or dedicates oneself to one's guardian saint). According to the Regla de Ocha, as practiced in Cuba, each person is the daughter or son of one or more saints. Each « son » or « daughter » has a « mother » and a « father » saint. While there are various ways to determine who the saint is (the term used is which saint « sits on the head » of the person) by divinatory arts, the surest way is to dedicate oneself to one's guardian saint. Only when the initiation ceremony actually takes place and the saint, invoked, comes down (descends) to « sit on the head » of the person (the act of possession) can one be certain who the guardian angel is.

To be sanctified one must find a santero who is himself sanctified and who agrees to be one's « godfather » or « godmother » (*padrino* or *padrina*). Traditionally the novice then moves in with his or her godparent for a week (sometimes a month or longer) to prepare for the initiation. Today, one more often simply studies with one's godparent regularly for the length of time he or she indicates. After the initiation ceremony has taken place, in thanks and as a souvenir, the godchild presents the godmother or father with a plate on the back of which is inscribed the name of the godchild and the date that the initiation took place. The number of plates on the wall of a santero's house is one indication of the number of godchildren the santero or santera has initiated. Gloria had approximately thirty or more plates on her wall. Another quite old and venerable *santero mayor* (major santero) had close to 70 hung in such a way as to form a pyramid covering an entire wall. (One can also have initiated many people without displaying the plates).

My offer to bring Gloria a plate as a souvenir from France, as well as that of one of my Cuban informant's to give a plate on which he had inscribed his name and the date to the santero mayor were both graciously accepted. While Gloria did not bother to mention the significance of the plates to me, the santero mayor did explain their significance, but added that he was nevertheless delighted to accept my informant's gift and hang it with the others. This fact is worth noting, because it implies a certain openness and flexibility which have enabled these different cults to survive over the centuries in often hostile circumstances.

One more point concerns the room in which the saint's day party in Gloria's house took place. Gloria's house is what is known as a house-temple (*casa-templo*). While homes of worshippers may have any number or combination of elements such as those found in Gloria's house, the homes of santeros (or paleros or abakuá) who have initiated people into the religion, of italeros (specialized in the art of divination), or of Babalawos usually have a separate room (or rooms) devoted to the cult(s). While at one point in the colonial history of Cuba secret societies or mutual aid societies organized by the different African immigrants according to religious and ethnic groups often had a room where they met to hold assemblies or celebrate certain rites

(Ortiz 1984), these places were rarely independent, collectively owned buildings. Rather, they usually formed part of a private home. There are no prayer houses as such in Cuba for Afro-Cuban religious practice.

As explained by various anthropologists, and as soon becomes obvious, each saint or orisha has certain attributes and is associated not only with particular personal characteristics and powers, but also with particular colors, plants, natural elements, flowers, metals, perfumes, receptacles, animals, foods, etc. Not only will the saint's altar be decorated with these specific attributes, but in the general decoration of the house, one is apt to find a reiteration of these themes. In the case of Ochún, for example, her colors are yellow and gold. Her scent is vetiver or santal. Her flower : buttercups and sunflowers ; her foods : honey, caramels, sweet oranges, lettuce, yellow rice, all sorts of sweets, all river fish and mollusks. Her animals are, among others, roosters, chickens, doves, ducks, castrated goats, peacocks... Her accessories : gold and copper, crowns, jewelry, coral necklaces, fans made of peacock feathers, mirrors and all particularly feminine objects. She is considered the guardian of love, of femininity and of the river. She is a symbol of grace, seductiveness.

## **Cult and Culture**

It would be impossible in this paper to enumerate and explain the significance of all the various decorative elements seen in homes which have, in fact, religious significance. Other examples of such anodine objects seen in the street or during carnival time and instances of vestimentary habits and certain gestures which also carry religious meaning will further complete this preliminary tableau. As the mind becomes aware of the nature and all pervasiveness of Afro-Christian synthetic cults in Cuban society, the eye seeks out and focuses upon such phenomena which previously passed unnoticed. In the streets of Havana, Matanzas, Santiago de Cuba, and probably the rest of Cuba's cities and countryside, exist, among others, altars, niched into the corner of a building, at a crossroads, with an image or statue of the Virgin, perhaps a candle or two, sometimes adorned with flowers, artificial or real, and perhaps a cigar. One also suddenly begins to notice a chicken at a crossroads, or on a little hill, a simple mound of earth, some fruit at the foot of a ceiba tree (a silk-cotton tree). Each of these indicates the occurrence of a religious ritual or offering dictated by the saints through the medium of the santero or babalawo to invoke the aid or clemency of the saint or to seek the saint's pardon, to atone for sins committed and for other propitiatory purposes.

Carnival is another annual, national occurrence which in Cuba is particularly charged with religious significance and bears testimony to the considerable degree of transculturation to which Cuba has been subject. Traditionally, Carnival is in February, and, in many Caribbean and Latin American countries, Brazil being one of the best known, the occasion for celebration, disguises, masks, parades and dancing in the streets. Holy Week



between Palm Sunday and Easter which in Spain gives rise to a parade, albeit quite solemn in nature, takes place in March or April, while the King's Day Carnival in colonial Cuba, during which time the governmental authorities allowed the slaves to come out into the streets in groups and perform their traditional dances and music, was celebrated at Epiphany on January 6th. Carnival in revolutionary Cuba carries elements of all these traditions. Since the Revolution of 1959, Carnival takes place in and around the week of July 26th. This mid-summer date allows the peasants and sugar cane workers, previously excluded from the festivities by the seasonal work calendar to participate. It also recuperates an event of great historic and symbolic importance to the Revolution, the day Fidel Castro and a small group of compatriots attacked the Moncada army barracks in the hope of overthrowing the dictator Fulgencio Batista. This failed revolt is the Cuban day of Independence. Its association with Carnival draws on feelings of nationalism and ethnic identity and joins them with these other strong ethno-religious elements.

During Carnival, the different neighborhoods or workplaces serve as poles around which groups unite to form a music and dance ensemble which will participate in the parade. This participation includes the building of a float and the organization of a music and dance number around a theme. While young groups choose themes around revolutionary slogans, social or political issues, seasonal themes, literary and poetic themes, etc., certain very old, working class and often black neighborhoods choose themes relating to Cuban colonial history. These are supposedly themes which originated during the King's Day parades and were handed down from generation to generation. Sometimes they reenact episodes of colonial history, as in the case of one such « traditional *comparsa* » (carnival group), the « *Componedores del batey* » (the washer-women of the slave quarters). Others choose themes stemming from African legends, as in the case of another traditional *comparsa* called « *El Alacran* » (the scorpion). « *El Alacran* », for example, originated in 1908 in the Jesus Maria quarter, one of the most African neighborhoods of Havana. Their theme is based around the story of a slave girl who was bitten by an animal whose name no one knew, until the babalawo told his people it was called a scorpion. The members of the *comparsa* enact the roles of the slaves cutting cane with their machetes, the landowner, his wife and daughter, the foremen with their whips, the babalawo and his colytes, usually the older women, who are santeras and sing the various African religious chants. As the artistic director of the *comparsa* explained, the lovely, colored lanterns which are constructed and twirled around on high poles during the parade represent the different orishas : the yellow one (Ochún), the blue and white (Yemaya), the red and white (Changó), and so on. As one can begin to see, Cuba's ethnic history and in particular, the African presence, is omnipresent.

This « African continuity in America » (Leon 1986) which seems in Cuba to be tainted by its religious nature, is evident not only in the objects which surround one and the utilisation of these objects, but also in social expressions such as clothing, gesture, food, language, not to mention the most

obvious, music, dance and the visual arts. One of the most common gestures is that of pouring a bit of rum on the floor or earth before taking the first drink or when starting a new bottle, as a first offering to the orishas. The act is usually accompanied by the utterance *por los santos* (for the saints).

What is particularly interesting and in the researcher's opinion indicative of the degree to which certain afro-religious customs and gestures have been assimilated by the society as a whole is the extent to which this simple act is performed by Cubans who do not profess the religion. Even among those non-believers, certain gestures which have at the origin religious significance have penetrated the society to such a degree that they have become symptomatic of Cuban gestural idiosyncrasies<sup>8</sup>. One such gesture involves putting the hand on the head or running the hand palm down over the head from front to back. This gesture, on the one hand refers to the saint who « sits on one's head », one's guardian angel. It is, on the other hand, a gesture also used in ritual cleansing or exorcism (*una limpieza* or *despojo*) to refresh the believer, wash away evil powers or spirits. This is usually done with herbs, flowers, perfumes, baths. There are certain gestures that the santero or babalawo makes over the body, head, arms, chest, legs, back, feet when performing this ritual. When Cubans talk of health, getting rid of problems hovering over one's head, or related themes, this gesture or gestures often accompany the discussion.

Even a handshake can be a sign of belonging as in the case of the Abakuá. When a member of this society meets another Abakuá, they exchange a particular handshake and a few words of greeting in a African dialect.

Clothing often indicates religious affiliation. While white is a favorite color in the tropics, it is also the color of the Virgin of Mercy, Obatalá, creator of the earth and sculptor of man. She is also the deity of the firmament, of purity, peace and tranquility. Many followers of Obatalá wear white. A woman dressed in bright yellow, with many bracelets, rings and gold colored necklaces is probably a « daughter » of Ochún. In santería there are also sacred beads which protect the follower of the cult. Believers often wear the beads of their guardian saint. The beads are strung according to the saint's colors. And the way of stringing them, the alternation of colors is specific to each orisha.

## The Emergence and Persistence of these Cults

Various factors have no doubt contributed to the way in which these Afro-Cuban religious cultures blend into daily life in Cuba. One of the characteristics of syncretic African religious cults as practiced in Cuba seems

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8. Without entering into details, this same phenomenon can be seen in reverse, i.e. by the degree to which Cuban Catholicism has been penetrated in turn by popular Cuban and Afro-Cuban customs. For example, offerings in Church consist among other things, of cigars, a direct loan from Indo-African religious and cultural practices.

to be that normal, everyday objects become sacred or partake of the divine the moment that the object in question is perceived and accepted as such. In other words the object's sacredness seems to be largely a matter of intention, that of the giver or that of the receiver or both. If the santero advises someone to bathe his child in white flowers when the child takes a bath, the important factor is not so much whether the person is a believer nor even exactly how she or he performs the ritual. However it is important that the person buys or picks the flowers with the specific intention of using them for such a ritual bath. In certain cases, of course, a particular ritual performed by a santero or babalawo is necessary either to reenforce the divine power of the object or to prepare it to perform certain specific acts. For instance, a santero may ask one of his consultants to buy a small doll to represent one of the orishas, to dress the doll in the appropriate costume and then to give it to the babalawo to dedicate (by the performance of a particular ritual usually involving an annointment of sorts). The doll serves its purpose as a protective talisman from the moment the believer buys or makes it and dresses it appropriately ; nevertheless, it is officialized or given even greater power once the santero has santified it. It seems logical to say that once a person adheres to such a religious mind-set (or world view), almost everything encountered has a potential for the sacred (or partakes of the divine spirit).

This also explains in part why innumerable bric-a-brac found in homes, often brought as gifts by foreigners visiting Cuba, can easily be incorporated into the collection of fetishes : a copy of Boticelli's Venus can be associated with Yemaya, the mistress of the sea, of the ocean and of deep waters. A small replica of the Eiffel Tower might be an offering to Ogun, the warrior saint, the forger of metals. Like the Catholic saints, the orisha are usually associated with various stories, sometimes miracles performed, others times good deeds accomplished during their lifetime, which symbolize their varied virtues. Any object associated with one of these stories (*pattaki*) may also become a cult object.

Another interpretation of the seemingly hidden nature of Afro-Cuban syncretic cults (or a complementary one) finds its source in the history of the African population of Cuba<sup>9</sup>. Unlike the rest of the continent, and in an effort to avoid a revolt by a united mass of black slaves, the colonial authorities in Cuba separated the slave population according to ethnic group (called « nations ») and permitted slaves and black or mulatto free-men to form mutual aid societies. These societies were places where religious ceremonies and rituals were maintained and transmitted. However, at certain moments in her history, Cuba's ruling elite chose to ban the practice of African religious cults. During these periods, when King's Day parades were banned, mutual

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9. The peculiar nature of Cuban nationalism – independentist and anti-racist – can be seen by a study of the works of Fernando Ortiz (1881-1969), in particular his debate with composer/musician, Sanchez de Fuentes (1874-1944) (Ortiz 1965 & 1987), as well as in the biographies of various artists such as Nicolas Guillen, Bola de Nieve, Rita Montaner et al.

aid societies forced underground and religious assemblies forbidden, the natural camouflage of such cults enabled them to endure.

Furthermore, any custom or ritual associated with Africa, being tainted with the mark of slavery and the prejudice toward black Africans that such an institution propagated (Ortiz 1987), black or mulatto Cubans often preferred to occult their adherence to or practice of such « primitive » beliefs.

Even after the Revolution, attitudes concerning the obscurantist aspects of all religions caused many believers to hide their faith. Until very recently, no practicing member of a religion was permitted to be a member of the Communist party. (Nevertheless, many government officials and even high-ranking military were often practicing members of one or more syncretic cults). The recent Cuban Communist Party congress voted to change this ruling. What was once *de facto* has become *de jure*. Today, several such mutual aid societies continue to exist, to a great degree thanks to the original colonial policy with respect to slaves, and many religious customs and traditions remain intact, in spite of a great degree of transculturation.

## Conclusion

The ways mentioned above, and many more not mentioned, in which certain aspects of these Afro-Cuban synthetic religious cults blend into the everyday life of all Cubans is a paradigm of how cult becomes culture. As these remarks have tried to demonstrate, it would seem that due to a long and complex progress of immigration and transculturation in Cuba, certain Afro-Catholic syncretic religious cults, their rituals and practices, became, and still are, associated with a particular concept of national identity. It is in the areas of music, dance, poetry and literature, all of which have a primary role in Afro-Cuban syncretic religious practice, that this cultural nationalism grew up. Its two important moments were first of all the end of the XIXth century with the Cuban war of independence, during which certain white native-born Cubans, mulattos and black free-men and slaves (called « mambi ») joined forces to fight against Spain. The introduction into Cuba at this time of the French *contredanse* which later became the *danzon*, Cuba's first national cultural expression, and the polemic which such a dance suscited is a symbolic example of this cultural nationalism.

The beginning of the XX century, between 1925 and 1940, the heyday of « Afro-Cubanism » was the second key moment in the history of Cuban nationalism and the search for a national ethnic identity with its expression in the poetry of Nicolas Guillén, in the popular and lyric music of Ernesto Lecuona (1896-1963), Moisés Simons (1890-1945), for example, and in their interpretations by Rita Montaner and Bola de Nieve, and in the Afro-Cuban influenced concert music of Antonio Amadeo Roldan (1900-1939) and Alejandro Garcia Caturla (1906-1940). In these two periods, this particular mixture – Cuban ethnologist, Fernando Ortiz, calls it the « *ajiaco* » (a stew made of all sorts of meats, fish, and vegetables combined) – of Afro-Cuban

religious culture and Spanish colonial and post-colonial culture (two of the most important, but not the only racial and cultural influences) contributed to the formation and consolidation of what today is considered Cuban ethnic or national identity. An identity, moreover, which the Cubans themselves define today as mono-ethnic and multiracial » (Eli Rodriguez 1991).

While certain non-Cuban researchers or journalists feel this definition is more of a state propaganda tool (Kurlansky, 1992) than a scientifically derived definition, the previous examples of the extent to which certain cultural manifestations penetrate the society as a whole, becoming « a form of cultural behavior of the Cuban people » (Eli Rodriguez 1991) tend to support the Cuban thesis concerning ethnic identity.

*J. B., Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Urbaine*

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